

COVID-19 related activities by UNHCR for refugees and asylum-seekers

Introduction: There are **2,172 refugees and 2,430 Asylum seekers residing in Ukraine**. Ukraine offers both refugee status and complementary protection to those who have fled persecution and war in their own countries. Originally from over 60 countries, some of them managed to learn Ukrainian, find a job, start a business and integrate; others have encountered challenges in integrating. For those who are struggling, the current COVID-19 pandemic may put them at heightened risk. In Ukraine, the main challenges include **access to information, access to national systems and services, especially for asylum-seekers who are unable to benefit from health care systems free of charge**. Many refugee and asylum seekers do not possess valid civil documents, which would facilitate access to different social services and especially health care.

Support to the State Migration Service (SMS): On 17 March, UNHCR shared with SMS best practices of measures adopted in European Union member states to ensure protection of refugees and asylum-seekers following the outbreak of COVID-19. The information covered access to territory and the asylum procedure, as well as communication with communities. Echoing the statement made by the High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, on 19 March 2020, UNHCR emphasized to the SMS that **states must manage their borders in the context of this unique crisis as they see fit. But these measures should not result in closure of avenues to asylum, or of forcing people to return to situations of danger**. UNHCR also shared with SMS a recent document published by UNHCR on **key legal considerations on access to territory for persons in need of international protection in the context of the COVID-19 response**. SMS has also recently adapted its regulations so that asylum-seekers do not have to approach their office to extend their documents. This protects asylum-seekers against detention and fines.



Translation of materials for refugees and asylum seekers: On 16 March, UNHCR shared with SMS information issued by WHO on how to prevent transmission of the virus; the material was translated into the six official UN languages, as well as into Somali and Farsi. The translated materials are now available in the Temporary Accommodation Centres (TAC) for asylum-seekers in Zakarpatska and Odesa, as well as the migration services in Kyiv and Zakarpatska.

Photo by SMS.

Refugee Community Leaders informed: Information related to COVID-19 prevention was shared with refugee communities through their leaders over the phone and through social media. The leaders will subsequently share the information with community members who may not have easy access to social media.

HELP Website updated with information on COVID-19: UNHCR Ukraine utilizes UNHCR's HELP platform to reach out to refugees and asylum seekers in Ukraine. Since the declaration of the COVID-19 as a pandemic, **UNHCR added information about COVID-19** and the link to the WHO website for refugees and asylum-seekers to consult it.

Detergents for Refugee Temporary Accommodation Centres: UNHCR received a donation of *Domestos detergents* from Unilever Ukraine. The product contains hypochlorite, a disinfectant recommended by WHO. The products were delivered to TACs where many refugees and asylum seekers reside: in Yahotyn (84 refugees and asylum-seekers); Mukachevo (69 refugees and asylum-seekers) and Odesa (95 refugees and asylum-seekers). *Photo top right by NEEKA.*

UNHCR NGO partners: UNHCR's legal partners (R2P, Neeka and "Tenth of April") provide legal assistance over the telephone and maintain a duty officer system to handle urgent cases in person. Newly arrived asylum-seekers are assisted to write to SMS to formally express their intention to apply for asylum once SMS reception offices re-open. UNHCR's social partners (R2P, Rokada, Neeka and "Tenth of April") continue to support persons with specific needs through telephone counselling and delivery of assistance.



UNHCR Global Key Messages on COVID-19

- UNHCR calls on States to ensure that their responses to the Coronavirus meet humanitarian standards and ensure that the needs of refugees, and all those seeking international protection, are taken into account.
- UNHCR calls on all States, members of civil society, faith-based groups and the business community to exercise leadership in rejecting stigmatization of, or discrimination against, people who contract the Coronavirus.
- States are entitled to take necessary and proportionate measures to manage risks to public health. When doing so, States are bound by international law to respect the protection needs of asylum seekers and refugees and of those who have been forcibly displaced within their own countries.
- While a State may decide to close its borders to protect public health, it should not deny people in need of international protection an effective opportunity to seek asylum. Where a State has closed its borders, the processing of asylum claims should continue.
- All States are bound to respect the international principle of non-refoulement. No State should return a person seeking international protection back to a situation where his/her life is at risk or there is a risk of persecution or serious harm because of his or her health status.
- Imposing a blanket measure to preclude the admission of refugees or asylum-seekers, or of those of a particular nationality or nationalities, without measures to protect against refoulement, would be discriminatory and would not meet international standards, in particular as linked to the principle of non-refoulement.
- Health concerns do not justify the systematic use of immigration detention against individuals or groups of asylum-seekers or refugees.